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Off to see the Wizard

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Just like in Oz or Middle Earth, there are good Wizards and bad Wizards. (U.S. navy photo by Lt. Cmdr. Saacha Hake)

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Over the years I have observed many creative terms for military psychologists. Some are funny and adapted to the way the military names everyone. Psych-O is a good depiction of this. On Navy ships the titles of various officers are shortened, so the Operations Officer becomes the Ops-O, the Weapons Systems Officer (WSO) becomes the Wizzo, so it only makes sense that the Psychology Officer becomes the Psych-O.


These 'terms of endearment' slip easily off of the Sailor's tongue, but make policy makers addressing destigmatization uneasy...a "Shrink On Board" does not sound suitably helpful when abbreviated.


While different services and workplaces have their own terms, there is one in widespread use which crosses all of the branches of service: "The Wizard". Date of coinage is unknown, but the meaning is seemingly clear. The Wizard can use their powers to make people


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disappear from their commands and from the service in general. For service members who no longer want to be in the military, the belief is that The Wizard can get you sent home, without having to kill a witch, steal some shoes and click that pair of ruby slippers three times. And while The Wizard connotation at first seems stigmatizing and derogatory, not everything is as it appears.

Just like in Oz or Middle Earth, there are good Wizards and bad Wizards. My first introduction to the concept of a “good” Wizard was at a holiday dinner early in my military career. It was a military Thanksgiving, at one of those overseas dinners where you temporarily create a new family out of random friends and strangers in order to celebrate the holiday with some semblance of normalcy. I was sitting next to a Marine and normal conversation ensued, as in “What do you do?” After I told him I was a psychologist, he said, “The Wizard just helped one of my friends who was having problems after Iraq.” ‘What’s this?’ I thought, ‘Marines believe The Wizard can use their magical powers for good?’ Up until that point, I hadn’t put two and two together to come up with the notion that Wizards might be perceived to have more powers than making people disappear. A good Wizard fixes people.

In my current command, I am called two things (to my face). In day to day business and workplace banter I am “The Psych”. When there is an issue or a Marine is presenting for an interview, the Marines revert to referring to me as The Wizard. This seems completely normal to them and to ask them not to refer to me in that way would surely result in all kinds of reverse effects and unintended consequences. They’d figure out how to make a yellow brick road out of the passageway; a Cairn terrier would be discovered roaming the halls; and they would refer to me as The Wizard twice in every sentence. It is assured that a pointy hat and wand would appear in my office.



Confidence that your doctor can help you and belief in their abilities to get you back in the fight

While one might say that service members are willing to joke around with The Psych and poke fun at being “off to see The Wizard,” is the term harmful overall? I say no – while one can argue these terms are defaming, conversely one can also argue that they put some humor in going to see a military psychologist, which could be hypothesized to make it easier, not harder, to go. The term is given in a mixture of humor, professional respect, and even a little amateur awe. There is also an essential truth; Wizards have

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are keys in treating any problem. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Lance Cpl. Samuel Fernandez)

power and can heal. Many more people leave The Wizard to return to full duty than those who disappear. And seeing The Wizard can cause

powerful and unexpected repercussions. The Wizard can give you back your heart, brain and courage instead of just getting you back to Kansas.

So while it is true that sometimes military psychologists set things in motion that make people disappear or get people home, most of the time we help people reclaim their lives, grow from their military experiences and give them what they need to remain fully functioning members of the military and society. If service members believe a little magic is involved...it's a powerful placebo. Confidence that your doctor can help you and belief in their abilities to get you back in the fight are keys in treating any problem. The benefits of one's own expectation of recovery are well described in the literature, a necessary component of treatment on which military psychologists of all people must capitalize.

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